DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 295 PS 018 247

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TITLE Peer Influences in Early Childhood Painting.
PUB DATE 28 Mar 89
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiotape Recordings; Classroom Research; *Comprehension; *Peer Influence; *Play; Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Contour

ABSTRACT

In an effort to clarify some of the problems educators have in understanding children's play behavior, a half-hour-long episode of two 4-year-old girls playing with newsprint, paints, and brushes at an easel is described. The episode showed how ephemeral yet recognizable play can be. The idea of countours is used to describe play behavior in its interactive entirety. In the 30-minute period, the two girls explored the play environment, prepared and explored materials, engaged in representational play, and became involved in dramatic play and a game with rules. They then returned to exploration and representational depiction. One would expect the easel to be used for symbolic representation and exploration with paint; however, the easel also served as the location for many types of play. The children moved quickly and fluently in and out of different types of play. Interruptions and conflicts did not fragment the playing; they simply contributed to a different shape for the play. Although educators should discern when children are solitary or cooperative, exploring or representing, pretending or not pretending, categorization alone is not sufficient. The existence of fluid transformations that can be seen over the course of play sequence suggest the challenge to teachers that play can provide, as well as the potential of play for learning and development. (RH)

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Peer Influences in Early Childhood Painting

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Support for this study was provided by The University Research Institute at The University of Texas at Austin. A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1988.

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The problem of understanding classroom play is addressed through an analysis of play contours. Building on Vygotsky (1974), the authors propose that traditional categories fail to capture the complexities of play. A model including the influences of materials, social relations, real-world experience, and motivation to represent as they contribute to play is outlined. A case study of two four-year-old girls painting illustrates how these contours are formed. The girls are seen to progress through a sequence including exploration, depiction, criticism, role play, and a game with rules, sometimes in parallel and sometimes interactively. Materials and peers are seen to serve as pivots in the children's transformations over the course of the session, giving a complex contour to the play. Findings are discussed in terms of play theories and classroom practice.

Peer Influences in Early Childhood Painting

The problem of interpreting classroom behavior and encouraging play in early childhood classrooms has challenged teachers of young children for years (Almy, Monighan, Scales & Van Hoorn, 1985; Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn & Almy, 1987). While we may believe in the importance of play for young children in our programs, it is not always clear exactly what it is that we think they will be doing as they play. How to understand the meaning of a stack of blocks for a three-year-old or the importance of a chase-and-giggle game for kindergarten boys and girls is something that can either haunt us, or, more likely, just be ignored. Play is so complicated and so difficult to define that in many cases we opt to overlook it rather than truly value it and encourage it.

With play firmly established as a developmentally appropriate activity in early childhood classrooms (NAEYC, 1986a; NAEYC, 1986b), it seems important to consider its nature and how we can understand it better. The major advances in play research (e.g. Fein & Rivkin, 1986; Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983) have given us new insights, particularly in the areas of symbolic play and play communications. Other areas of play have received much less attention. But somehow, even with hundreds of articles to guide us, we still have a problem interpreting what children are doing as they play. Why is that? Why does all the theory and data that good minds have generated take us only so far when we watch children in classrooms? In this article, we hope to clarify some of the problems we have when we view play activities. We will begin by presenting some of the ideas about play that exist to help us understand it. Then we will look at an episode from a nursery school classroom to see how ephemeral but recognizable play can be, although not necessarily where we may expect to see it. We hope that this episode will help others understand more about the origins and many faces of play.

We have an interesting body of literature on play in the early childhood classrooms (Fein & Rivkin, 1986). That literature has been growing recently, particularly in the area of the talk children engage in and their social relations while they play. Any number of studies have looked at play talk in order to provide insights into cognitive processes, discourse cohesiveness (Fein & Rivkin, 1986), social relationships (Fein & Rivkin, 1986; Corsaro, 1985), and language itself. Some of these studies have acknowledged what might be called environmental or ecological factors (e.g., play area in the classroom,

materials made available to the children) (McLoyd, 1986), while others have virtually ignored what children's hands and bodies were doing while they talked (Garvey, 1977). The social qualities of play (Parten, 1932) have been studied with an eye toward leadership or popularity in the classroom, especially as these qualities relate to personal adjustment, sustained play, or group cohesion. We are not satisfied with any of these approaches as a way of understanding play itself.

Our position is that play is created by children as they interact with materials, with others, or a combination of both. The play that they create is shaped or contoured by the situation in which they find themselves: the media they encounter, the ideas they bring with them, the reactions or stimulation of others, and their own motivations all contribute to the contour of the play. Vygotsky's idea of a pivot for play could be useful (Vygotsky, 1974). From his view, children are seen to use objects (or people) during play to aid their mental transformation from action to meaning. This perspective differs from the metacommunicative analysis done by Giffen (1984). Her work has also influenced us, particularly in its recognition of both verbal an nonverbal aspects of play. Since she is primarily interested in communication, much of her analysis and all of her rules deal only with verbal features of play. We strongly believe that children, individually or socially, will create play irrespective of their environment, but that the environment (materials, ideas, other persons) does make distinctive contributions to each play situation by means of the pivets that present themselves in the environment. These contributions can, but may not, be reflected in their play-related talk. This is where our idea of contours of play is relevant.

What are these contours of play? We believe that it is helpful to view play as it runs its course. Contours allow us to describe the play, as children move from exploration, to creation, to exchange, into pretense, then out of pretense again. The course of play must include these- and other elements in order for play to take shape. Its origins, both developmentally and situationally, must reflect (l) the influences of the materials (as they are explored or used to create), (2) the social relations in the class (solitary or group interactions), (3) experience with real world objects and events that children bring with them, and (4) motivation to represent. The contours we see are similar to Dyson's "worlds" which children experience as they develop their writing skills; the child's imaginary world (related to his task at hand) interacts with an ongoing

social world (peers in the classroom) and the wider world of people, places, objects and events (Dyson, 1988a, 1988b). But during play, the imaginary world tends to dominate or become more salient. The contour of play reflects children moving from the task at hand (manipulating objects, exploring, creating, representing), to social relations (with peers or adults; exchange of ideas, criticism, collaboration), to pretense (built on objects or socially generated ideas). The play takes shape, or is given contour, by the way a child or children move in and out of these interactions between objects, people, and ideas.

Therefore we are not talking about play as only pretense or role playing. Play is more than that. Play builds on exploration and children's contacts in their classrooms and worlds (Schwartzman, 1987). We might see play anywhere. We usually see pieces of play that have origins that we need to know if we are to understand them more fully. It is necessary to follow the contours of play, to see play in its "interactive entirety" (Almy, et al, 1985) if we are to make any sense of it and help children further their purposes.

But what does play look like in its various contours? Let us look at a classroom experience as a way of following the contours and seeing one way play can be understood.

A Case of Classroom Play

The nursery school classroom, with its dress ups and dolls, unit blocks and tempra paints, is an environment purposefully arranged to facilitate play. The first author, working as head teacher with sixteen four-and five-year-olds and a number of student assistants, audio taped conversations taking place in the easel area for a study concerning children's uses of classroom materials (Yeatman & Reifel, 1988). We will follow Anna (5.0) and Zoe (4.5) throughout a half-hour interaction, focusing on instances which we feel were pivotal in shaping the course of their play.

The episode occurred just two weeks after Halloween. The interaction began as Anna joined Zoe at a plexiglas easel supplied with newsprint, green, orange, and purple paint (secondary colored were part of the curriculum this week), and brushes. Painting was a familiar activity for both girls, but the plexiglas easel was a novel item. After wiping up spills and drips left by previous painters, Anna and Zoe got down to business:

Anna: O.K. first I'm gonna need some orange--
Zoe: Me too.
Anna: I'm makin' pumpkin.
Zoe: Me too.
(singing, humming)
Zoe: Wanna call this a pumpkin?
Anna: Yeah.
Zoe: Yeah, make a Halloween picture.
Anna: I need some more orange . . .

At this point, play included manipulation of the medium, and talk directly connected to, and even accounting for, the girls' actions with the paint. Anna encountered the paint and deliberately chose to work with a specific color: orange. She created a depiction, designating it as a "pumpkin". The roundish orange outline covering a good two-thirds of her paper did indeed account for basic pumpkin attributes; Anna's actions and words reflected familiarity with the real-world edible gourd. Zoe's comment concerning a Halloween picture reflected knowledge of the paraphernalia connected with a recently celebrated holiday. This interchange served to propose Halloween as a theme which could recur throughout the episode.

The pumpkin depictions led to a verbal exchange of opinions with peers, which in turn served to alter the course of the play episode. Julie (4.10), and Carrie (4.4), two passers-by, commented on Zoe's depiction:

Julie: Well, a pumpkin doesn't look like that.
Zoe: I know but I'm just making it the way I want.
Julie: Did you know Zoe's makin' a pumpkin the wrong way.

* * *

Carrie: A pumpkin is not like that.
Anna: I can make it anyway I want.
Zoe: Me too!

Concerned with the "right way" to represent reality, Julie continued her objections, and questioned Anna's knowledge about pumpkins:

Anna: It has some leaves.
Did you know that some pumpkins have leaves?
Julie: Unh uh.
Teacher: Well they do.
Anna: Well you don't go to the right store to see'm.
Zoe: Make some leaves ---
Julie: How do you know?
Anna: Cuz. I've seen a pumpkin before.

Julie: Uh--I have too.

Zoe and Anna competently defended their right to utilize the paint and label their depictions as they saw fit. Anna insisted that pumpkins do have leaves; she justified her argument with her real-world experience, and was even supported in this by the teacher. Nevertheless, Julie and Carrie's negative judgements served as a powerful influence for change. Immediately following the conversation, the depiction of pumpkins came to an end. The girls covered their orange outlines with green and purple smears. Zoe suggested that they fingerpaint, while Anna insisted that they "paint it [the paper] everywhere."

Unlike painting with a brush, fingerpainting is accepted as an activity requiring no end product, and is, therefore, less risky, for critical judgements are unlikely when it is understood that no end product is expected. Thus, representative depiction with the medium was transformed into free-form exploration with the paint:

Zoe: Let's make a big blump and then fingerpaint.
Anna: O.K. I'm just gonna keep on finish painting.

Criticism from Julie and Carrie, coupled with Zoe's suggestion, led the girls to immerse their hands in the paint and discover the delights of swirling the slick, squishy substance all around their papers.

From this exploratory, sensorimotor play, the girls soon shifted into pretense:

Anna: I'm a witch so I make purple stew.
Zoe: Oh, I make green stew.
Anna: I'm a witch cuz I make purple stew.
* * * [They continued in this vein.]
Anna: Hehehehe. We are witches, we are making . . . (chanting)
Zoe: We are witches, we are witches, (laughter)

The paint was now neither a medium for symbolic representation nor an object to be explored in a sensorimotor fashion. Instead, Anna and Zoe expanded the Halloween theme introduced earlier in their play by performing object and role transformations; the paint became witches' stew, and the girls themselves changed into cackling witches. The girls were clearly engaged in pretense at the easel. How had Anna and Zoe arrived at this point in their play?

Negative peer assessments of their depictions; Zoe's efforts to initiate fingerpainting as the main activity; the "discovery" of the fluid, malleable properties of the paint; real-world experiences with the celebration of Halloween; the girls' own ideas concerning witches and witches' stew: all of these influences led to a session of interactive pretend play at the easel.

The next play shift occurred as the "witches" mixed their "stew"; orange, green and purple paint combined to form a greyish-brown.

Zoe:	Now it's turning orange. Now it's turning brown.
Anna:	Now it's turning grey again. Now it's turning grey!
Zoe:	Wow. Wow!
Anna:	Now let's keep on mixing mixing mixing.

The paint itself was now the focus of their play, not as "stew" but as an object to be explored. Anna wanted to "keep on mixing mixing mixing"; her play here was firmly anchored in the paint and its physical properties. The girls' creativity now lay not in object and role transformations, but in the exploratory manipulation conducted with the paint. Because the girls had observed a change in the medium with which they played, a shift from pretense to exploration occurred.

Following a bathroom break, Anna and Zoe re-engaged in pretend play: ("I am a little witch my name is Witchie"...."Are you painting? Are you fingerpainting yet?"). Anna maintained the state of pretense throughout this portion of the episode, remaining focused on transformations for purple/green "stew" and "Witchie Witch". Zoe, on the other hand, conducted inquiries about Anna's actions with the paint, explored the medium, and engaged in pretend play. Fingerpainting remained an overriding concern for Zoe, despite her willingness to join Anna's "Witchie Witch" play. Zoe's pretense with the paint differed slightly from Anna's, for Zoe made green soup, ("I make green soup!"), while Anna continued with the original stew. It is possible that Zoe's shift from "stew" to "soup" was triggered by the change in color on the paper as she added more green paint. She may have differentiated between a more purplish "stew" and a more green "soup" that came into being as she manipulated the paint.

The next shift occurred as the girls concentrated on moving the stew/soup/paint all around their papers. Play intensified as Anna and Zoe squealed and laughed, disregarding strenuous objections from a group of

builders with manipulative toys at a nearby table. Moving further into their imaginary Halloween world, the girls exchanged loud and excited "Boo's!" as they squatted down and jumped up, peeking around the sides of the easel. For a few minutes, they ignored the paint and the easel served as the pivot around which their play was shaped; they became wild giggling ghosts.

The "Boo" game ended abruptly as the girls focused once again on paint and pretense. Simultaneously chanting and smearing paint, Anna provided a rhythmic introduction to the next pretend role:

Anna: I have another idea that we can do ... (chanting)
I have a black cat, her name is Black Cat.
Zoe: (chanting, inaud.)
Anna: I have a black cat, her name is Black Cat.
Zoe: (Laughter) I have a black cat! And my name is Black Cat.

As in the previous dialogue, the transformations taking place differed slightly for the two girls. Anna continued her pretense as a witch who owned a black cat. Zoe changed her pretense, shifting from witch to black cat. Their roles were now complementary, rather than identical.

The next shift occurred following a peer's inquiry concerning Anna and Zoe's original pumpkins depictions. Anna explained the pumpkins demise and their subsequent play this way: "Cuz we messed up on it and me and Zoe are pretending to be witches and we make (inaudible) stew."

After providing this account of their play, Anna and Zoe once again moved from pretense back to exploration and depiction. Comments of "Ooo, yuck" and "Gross!" were followed by a suggestion ("Hey wanna put your whole hand?"), and a final decision to make "heart arrow" (i.e. inscribe valentines in the paint) and "do scribble scrabble" (i.e. paint with the fingertips of both hands). The episode came to a close soon after when Anna and Zoe announced the completion of their paintings and exited the easel area.

The tangible product of this play episode (stereotypical valentine hearts inscribed in a rather unattractive grey-brown goop of paint) revealed little, if anything, about the process these girls went through. The richness of the play created by Anna and Zoe lay in their actions and their words, not in the sodden papers left to hang on the drying rack.

Conclusions

This entire play episode demonstrates the range of play and play-related behavior that can occur in one classroom setting, as well as demonstrating how difficult it is to typify exactly what is happening in one location in a classroom. Within one 30 minute period of time, these girls engaged in exploration of the play environment (the easel in this case), preparation of materials, exploration with materials (mixing paint, both parallel and cooperatively), representational play (painting pumpkins and "witches stew", apparently parallel then cooperatively), dramatic play ("We are witches"), and a game with rules ("Boo" around the easel in turns). Then they returned to exploration and representational depiction. The easel, where one is led to expect symbolic representation and exploration with paint, turns out to be the location of many types of play. It would be a mistake to attribute traditionally defined types of play to any location in the room (a "creative play" area or a "dramatic play" area) when a range of types can be seen in one location where they might not be expected.

Also, by looking at the activities of these children at different times during this episode, it is clear that the children moved quickly and fluently in and out of different types of play. Exploration of paint became exploration of their ideas of pumpkins. A critical comment turned the depicted pumpkins into "witches stew," a pretend transformation of the paint at hand. With the paint transformed in this manner, it was an easy transformation for the stew-makers to become pretend witches. The many transformations of materials and roles in rapid succession demonstrate how fluid play can be. Children can be exploring one second and pretending the next, then return to exploration. What is interesting is the flow of children's ideas as they play. The ideas can lead to one another or build on one another, from orange paint to pumpkins to witches' stew to witches to black cats to ghosts. There can be a fluid thematic continuity to this play that is given shape by the way the children use the materials and react to one another. Even though differences of opinion ("a pumpkin in not like that") may appear to interrupt the flow of the girls' play, it in fact contributes to the play. The girls' reassessment of their pumpkin paintings channels the flow to a related exploration (finger painting) and a related Halloween theme (witches' stew and witches). Interruptions and conflicts do not fragment their play; they contribute to a different shape for the play.

The fluid transformations that we can see over the course of a play sequence are why we think there is merit to following the contours of play, rather than just trying to typify it. A teacher or researcher who looked at a ten or fifteen second segment of our easel painting sequence could have concluded that the girls were involved in solitary exploratory play or interactive representational play. And they would be correct, as far as they had seen. We hope it is obvious that there is much more than that going on at this easel, that there is a unique shape to this sequence. Exploration of materials leads to exploration of ideas. The children's contact with materials interacts with their social world in the classroom, with their real world knowledge, and with their fantasy worlds. Sometimes those worlds match as children interact during exploration and pretense, and sometimes individuals may be in a world of their own even as they interact with others. Play must be seen as a world of possibilities, built in each situation with the materials at hand with children's own ideas, and possibly in collaboration with others. By reducing play to a type of behavior, we miss the emerging contours that children create. And each contour reveals a wealth of thinking and learning that is going on.

This shaping is not a problem with play; it is one of its strengths. The control that children have over their ideas and actions allows them to experience ideas in a manner that is developmentally appropriate, because they discover new meanings at their optimal pace and select ideas that motivate. These girls had an interest in exploring paint and in exploring their relationship. Exploration of the paint led to depiction and discovery of new qualities in the paints. Exploration of their relationships led to new understanding of paints and depiction. Exploration of paint and their social relationship led to pretense. All sorts of new ideas and roles became their subject matter. They were able to learn through their exchange of ideas related to Halloween and through their explorations with paint.

So how can we make sense of the flow of contours of play that children create? We sense that categorizing behaviors is a part of our theoretical task; we do need to see when children are solitary or cooperative, exploring or representing, pretending or not. But any category must be seen as only part of a situational contour. Werner (1948) talked about fluidity in early childhood, and gave examples of individual children's flow of ideas. Perhaps we must attempt to apply his description to social encounters. It also appears that children in this study did use the paint and each other as pivots, in Vygotsky's

sense (Vygotsky 1974). Paint and peers were used during play to aid their mental transformation from action (brush strokes; finger painting) to meaning (pumpkins; witch enactment). This could be a useful way to consider the important contributions of materials (orange paint for pumpkins; finger painting for witches' stew) and of other people ("A pumpkin is not like that;" "My name is Little Witch.") to play. These pivotal experiences may mark the shifts in the play situation, shifts that create the contours we have demonstrated.

In terms of classroom practice, this case reveals the challenge to teachers that play can provide, as well as the potential play provides for learning and development. It seems important to remember that the materials we provide are an important basis for play, but we should not consider any material in a pre-conceived, categorical way. Paint is not only for creative arts. Blocks are not only for construction. Dolls may not be only for dramatic play. Children will make of these materials what they will, if we value play and allow them to explore their interests. This does not mean that we should be cavalier in our presentation of materials in the classroom. Just the opposite. Materials must be provided when children can take advantage of their possibilities; secondary colors can be well used after children have explored primary colors, and Halloween may be an optimal time for that exploration. Teachers must observe the flow of their children's play, to see when they need more to explore or when new ideas would be exciting. A classroom rich in materials will provide possibilities; the teacher must think carefully about what those possibilities are and observe the contours of play to see whether the materials are stimulating a flow of exploration, transformation, representation, and pretense.

The social aspect of play's contours should also be of interest to teachers. Do children have opportunities to interact with others whom they choose? Can they explore materials together? What do they talk about? Do they make suggestions to one another, challenge one another, pretend with one another? These encounters are part of the shape of play and deserve every bit as much attention as the materials we provide.

Because we value play and see children grow as the experience play, we hope to see more of it in classrooms. We also hope that research will begin to tell us more about what play can mean for children without reducing it to categories or concepts that are difficult for teachers to use and that fail to account for the situated learning that can be seen in classroom play's contours.

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March 29, 1991